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ABSTRACT

The content and methods of nurseries and kindergartens in Hong Kong were compared in this paper. Particular attention was given to: (1) the kinds of activities provided for children; (2) the use of grouping, textbooks, tests and examinations; (3) the allocation of homework; and (4) the role of the teacher. Data were gathered by means of interviews of principals of 69 preschools, 59 kindergartens, and 10 nurseries. Findings indicated that the program of Hong Kong preschools included both developmentally appropriate and inappropriate practices. Appropriate practices included the provision of a variety of activities for all areas of children's development. Children worked in small groups at least part of the time. These groups were in some cases determined by characteristics of the child, such as age and skill level. The number of textbooks tended to increase with age. Developmentally inappropriate practices included early introduction of the three R's and assignment of homework as early as 3 years. Tests were extensively used. Student choices were restricted in such areas as seating and materials. Small groups, when formed, were often determined randomly, rather than by consideration of the child's interests, needs, and motivations. Of the two program types, nurseries appeared to offer a more developmentally paced curriculum up to the student's fifth year, when program differences disappeared. (RH)

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# CONTENT AND METHODS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAMMES IN HONG KONG

Paper presented to the
Conference on Early Education and Development (0-6 years)
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Two types of early education and care exist in Hong Kong, nurseries and kindergartens. Nurseries are regulated by the Social Welfare Department and provide care, supervision and education for children between 2 and 6 years. Kindergartens, on the other hand, are regulated by the Education Department and provide education for children from 3 to 5 years inclusive. Enrollment in these centres is very high accounting for almost 250,000 preschool children of which approximately 89% go to kindergartens and the remainder to nurseries. The greater demand for kindergarten education is due to the fact that parents feel that these programmes are more academic and therefore provide a better preparation for primary school. Nursery programmes tend to use the learning-through-play approach which are considered to be only appropriate for the younger child.

The present paper compares the content and methods of these two types of programmes. In particular it focuses on the kinds of activities provided for children, the use of grouping of children, of textbooks, tests and examinations, the allocation of homework, and the role of the teacher in the preschool classroom.

## 2. METHODS

Principals of 69 preschools, 59 kindergartens and 10 nurseries, were interviewed about various aspects of their programme. The preschools were randomly selected by locality (Hong Kong, Kowloon, New Territories), in proportion to the overall population of preschools. Table 1 shows the distribution of preschools by type and locality. Total enrollment in the preschools was 25,640 children (24,070 in kindergartens, 1,570 in nurseries).

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Table 1: Number of Preschools by Type and Locality

| | KINDERGARTEN | NURSERY | OVERALL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hong Kong Island | 24 | 4 | 28 |
| Kowloon | 15 | 3 | 18 |
| New Territories | 20 | 3 | 23 |
| Total | 59 | 10 | 69 |

3. FINDINGS

1. CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES

The curriculum found in Hong Kong preschools covers a wide range of academic and non-academic activities. Some of these are common to all three age levels, 3, 4 and 5 years, whereas others are only offered to the older children. Tables 2 and 3 indicate the occurrence of the various activities in the programme.

Table 2: Occurrence of Non-Academic-type Activities in Preschools by Type of Preschool (Figures indicate % of Preschools)

| | KINDERGARTEN | | NURSERY | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 yrs curriculum | Overall curriculum | 3 yrs curriculum | Overall curriculum |
| Colour Concept | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Painting, Craft, Drawing | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Music, Singing, Movement | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Outings | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Lunch/Snack | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Self-Care | 98 | 98 | 100 | 100 |
| Birthday Party | 98 | 98 | 100 | 100 |
| Pract. Life Ed. | 97 | 97 | 100 | 100 |
| Gym, Games | 97 | 97 | 100 | 100 |
| Storytime | 97 | 97 | 100 | 100 |
| Drama | 97 | 97 | 90 | 90 |
| TV | 71 | 71 | 80 | 80 |
| Outdoor Play | 68 | 68 | 70 | 70 |

Both types of preschool have a very similar pattern of non-academic-type activities. All of them provide activities on colour concept, arts and craft, music and movement, outings and some sort of snack or lunch and a very high proportion also have practical life education and self-care skills, gym or games, birthday parties, stories and drama performances. Slightly fewer include watching television and outdoor play in their programme, but the relative

proportions of these activities between kindergartens and nurseries are very similar. About one third of the preschools do not offer outdoor play, presumably because of a lack of facilities. As far as non-academic activities are concerned, it seems that preschools either offer them at all age levels, or not at all. There are no instances were these are gradually introduced as the child grows older.

The situation is somewhat different with regard to academic activities. As shown in table 3, in almost all preschools, both kindergartens and nurseries, 3 year-old children learn to read; both Chinese characters and the English alphabet, and to count. In both kindergartens or nurseries, however, very few children of this age are expected to recite or copy texts, or to take down dictation Differences between the two types of programme can be seen in other activities such as reading and writing in Chinese ($p < .01$) and in reading and writing English. Kindergartens tend to introduce these activities at 3 years whereas nurseries usually offer these activities at either 4 or 5 years. By 5 years, however, the overall pattern of activities is very similar.

Table 3: Occurrence of Academic-type Activities in Preschool Programmes by Type of Preschool (Figures indicate % of Preschools)

| | KINDERGARTEN | | NURSERY | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 yrs curriculum | Overall curriculum | 3 yrs curriculum | Overall curriculum |
| LANGUAGE | | | | |
| - CHINESE | | | | |
| Character Recognition | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Reading | 96 | 100 | 70 | 90 |
| Writing | 95 | 98 | 70 | 90 |
| - ENGLISH | | | | |
| Letter Recognition | 98 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Reading | 88 | 93 | 70 | 90 |
| Writing | 80 | 94 | 70 | 90 |
| Copying | 20 | 27 | 10 | 10 |
| Reciting Text | 19 | 19 | 20 | 20 |
| Dictation | 44 | 76 | 30 | 60 |
| ARITHMETIC | | | | |
| Numbers/ Counting | 100 | 100 | 90 | 100 |
| Sums | 71 | 97 | 50 | 80 |

In brief, it seems that the programmes of curriculum activities are very similar in both types of preschool. Generally kindergartens have a tendency to introduce academic subjects at an earlier age than nurseries, but by 5 years the

differences are negligible.

2. USE OF GROUPINGS

The fact that an activity is included in a programme does not indicate the amount of time spent on it, nor the way in which it is carried out. It is therefore also important to know how activities are implemented. Do all children do the same thing at the same time in one large group, or are activities carried out in smaller groups of children? If grouping is used, what are the criteria employed? Tables 4 and 5 show the extent to which groupings and specific criteria are used in Hong Kong preschools.

Table 4: Percentage of Preschools using Groupings by Type of Activity and Type of Preschool

| Activity | KINDERGARTEN | NURSERY |
|---|---|---|
| Language work | 100 | 100 |
| Constructive activities | 100 | 100 |
| Number work | 51 | 60 |
| Physical activities | 23 | 40 |
| Games | 20 | 60 |

Table 5: Percentage of Preschools using Specific or Random Criteria for Grouping

| Activity | KINDERGARTEN | | NURSERY | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Use Criteria | Random | Use Criteria | Random |
| Language work | 44 | 55 | 80 | 20 |
| Constr. Activities | 41 | 59 | 80 | 20 |
| Number work | 19 | 81 | 60 | 40 |
| Physical activities | 14 | 86 | 30 | 70 |
| Games | 16 | 84 | 50 | 50 |

All kindergartens and nurseries use grouping for language and constructive activities, but fewer do so for number work, physical activities and games. Nurseries tend to use specific criteria significantly more than kindergartens for language and constructive activities (Fisher, $p < .05$). A large percentage of kindergartens use random or no grouping for number, physical activities and games. The most common criteria adopted for grouping the children are age and skill level, or a combination of both.

In brief, grouping based on specific criteria, such as age or skill level seems more commonly used in nurseries, whereas kindergartens either do not set up small groups, or if they do so, tend to set them up on a random rather than a planned basis.

## 3. USE OF TEXTBOOKS

Another question of interest in the preschool curriculum is the extent to which textbooks or workbooks are used. As indicated in table 6, most nurseries either do not use textbooks at all or if they do, not more than three at all ages. Approximately two thirds of the kindergartens use textbooks.
Overall, kindergartens use textbooks significantly more than nurseries at all ages (Fisher, $p < .05$).

Table 6: Percentage of Preschools using Textbooks by Type of Preschool, Age and Number of Textbooks used

| Number of Text Books used | KINDERGARTEN | | | NURSERY | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 yrs | 4 yrs | 5 yrs | 3 yrs | 4 yrs | 5 yrs |
| None | 34 | 32 | 32 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| 1-3 | 41 | 14 | 12 | 20 | 20 | 20 |
| 4-6 | 17 | 46 | 48 | - | - | - |
| 6-20 | 8 | 8 | 8 | - | - | - |
| Mean | 2.86 | 3.26 | 3.28 | - | - | - |

The number of textbooks used in kindergartens increases with age although the figure for 5 years is very similar to that of 4 years. A significantly larger number of textbooks are used at 4 years than at 3 years (t-test: $p < .001$).

## 4. USE OF TESTS AND EXAMS

Information on the use of tests or exams to assess or evaluate children's progress, one indication of the formal academic nature of the preschool curriculum, is given in Table 7.

Table 7: Percentage of Preschools giving Tests and Exams by Age Level and Type of Preschool

| Number of Tests and Exams | KINDERGARTEN | | | NURSERY | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 yrs | 4 yrs | 5 yrs | 3 yrs | 4 yrs | 5 yrs |
| **Tests** | | | | | | |
| None | 56 | 56 | 56 | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| 1-2 | 31 | 30 | 30 | - | - | - |
| 3-10 | 10 | 12 | 12 | - | - | - |
| 11-20 | 2 | 2 | 2 | - | - | - |
| Over 20(34) | - | - | - | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| **Exams** | | | | | | |
| None | 49 | 46 | 46 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| 1-2 | 41 | 41 | 41 | 20 | 20 | 20 |
| 3-8 | 10 | 13 | 13 | - | - | - |

The majority of nurseries and a large number of kindergartens give neither tests nor exams. Overall, kindergartens give significantly more tests and exams than nurseries (chi square $p < .05$). The preschool giving the largest number of tests is, surprisingly, a nursery rather than a kindergarten. Approximately one third of the kindergartens give 1-2 tests each year, and approximately 40% give 1-2 exams, one at the middle and one at the end of the year. There does not appear to be anY increase in the number of tests or exams as children grow older. Preschools appear to have a policy of either giving, or not giving, tests/exams and this applies to children at all levels.

## 5. HOMEWORK

One issue of current concern in early childhood education is that of homework at the preschool level. It is clear from table 8 that homework plays an important part in Hong Kong preschools. Only 7 preschools of the total sample, (4 kindergartens and 3 nurseries) state that they give no homework. The most common subject for homework is writing, followed by number work, learning English words, and learning to read Chinese words. A significantly higher percentage of kindergartens than nurseries give daily homework, although the differences for any particular subject are not significant.

Table 8: Percentage of Preschools giving Homework by Type of Preschool and Subject

| Subject | KINDERGARTEN | | NURSERY | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | None | Daily | None | Daily |
| Writing | 10 | 87 | 30 | 50 |
| Number work | 25 | 73 | 40 | 40 |
| English words | 61 | 36 | 70 | 20 |
| Chinese words | 68 | 29 | 70 | 20 |

## 6. TEACHER-CENTREDNESS

One area of particular interest in the preschool curriculum is the extent to which it is teacher or child-centred. In a teacher-centred class, the teacher takes most of the decisions and initiates many activities, whereas in a child-centred class, the child is allowed a high degree of freedom of choice for various aspects of the curriculum. It is evident from the data shown in table 9 that teachers play a predominant role in Hong Kong preschools. The only area where all preschools allow the child some choice is in the selection of playmates. All nurseries and many kindergartens also allow the children some choice in movement around the class and to a lesser extent in the choice of activities. Significantly more nurseries allow children to choose their seats than kindergartens ($p < .001$). Only very few kindergartens and nurseries allow children to choose their own materials when doing activities.

Table 9: Percentage of Preschools giving Child Choice by Type of Preschool and Area

| | KINDERGARTEN | | NURSERY | | Area |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No Choice | Some Choice | No Choice | Some Choice | |
| Playmates | - | 100 | - | 100 | |
| Movement in Class | 19 | 81 | - | 100 | |
| Activities | 49 | 51 | 10 | 90 | |
| Seating | 80 | 20 | 10 | 90 | |
| Materials | 65 | 35 | 60 | 40 | |

## 4. DISCUSSION

The programme of Hong Kong preschools can be characterized by containing elements of both developmentally appropriate and developmentally inappropriate practices (Bredekamp, 1986). On the one hand, a variety of activities are provided for all areas of a child's development - physical, social, emotional and cognitive - as can be seen from the range of non-academic activities provided. Children are also given some opportunity to choose from a variety of activities and materials. Children work in small groups for at least part of the time and these groups are in some cases determined by characteristics of the child, such as age and skill level. This practice is a recognition that young children generally learn better in small than in large groups. Further, the number of textbooks tends to increase with age. Children of 3 years have few textbooks, while at 4 years there is a marked increase in number. This is a recognition of the older child's improved ability to benefit from symbolic and more abstract representation.

On the other hand, developmentally inappropriate practices such as the introduction of the three R's, the setting of homework as early as 3 years by the vast majority of preschools, the extensive use of tests and exams, and the limited opportunities of choice in areas such as seating, materials are also noted. Small groups, when they exist, are often determined randomly, rather than taking into account the child's interests, needs or motivations. Children are evaluated on tests or examinations and all are expected to achieve the same skills and norms, regardless of their level of development. Textbooks are used at all ages which is an indication of uniform expectations and work for all children.

Comparisons between kindergartens and nurseries indicate both similarities but also some differences. Kindergartens on the whole seem to offer a more academic programme, and also to treat children in a more uniform way than nurseries. They have more textbooks, more tests and exams, more homework, more random grouping, less opportunity for children to exercise freedom of choice, and more academic activities at a younger age.

Nurseries on the other hand appear to offer a more developmentally paced curriculum. Groupings appear to take into account children's abilities, and children are allowed more choice in a larger number of areas.

The differences between kindergartens and nurseries are, however, more evident at 3 than at 5 years. By the time the child is 5 years, during the year immediately preceding entry into primary school, both types of preschool appear to be following a very similar type of programme.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides a picture of various components of Hong Kong preschool programmes, and highlights some major differences between kindergartens and nurseries. The variables studied, however, do not cover the processes of interaction between children and their social and physical environment. No study of a preschool programme would be complete without looking at additional process variables, such as the amount of time spent on the different activities, descriptions of what happens in the small groups, observations of adult/child and child/child interactions, etc. These elements, which were not covered in the present study, would need to be included in a future investigation of preschool programmes in order to obtain an overall understanding of what actually happens in Hong Kong preschools.